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That Cross

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That Cross
A liturgical drama based on Mark 8:27-38.
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,
The Liturgical Drama Troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre
First performance: September 18, 2003

Characters:

Jo
Connie
Mel
Carla
Michelle
Michael
Sidney
Ben

Scene: a church.

JO brings in a large laundry basket full of turtleneck shirts. She sets the basket down. She goes to the baptismal font and dips her fingers into the water. She makes the sign of the cross on her forehead. She returns to the laundry basket. She lays a robe on the altar. She lays each shirt carefully on a pew in perfect order. Then JO exits.

A pause.

CONNIE enters followed closely by MEL, CARLA, and MICHELLE; then, MICHAEL, a bit further back.

CONNIE:

Hey, there's a big cross in here.

MEL:

Well, duh...

CARLA:

Yeah, how has it been since you've *been* here, Connie?

CONNIE:

No, I mean there's a big cross lying right where we're supposed to rehearse.

MEL:

What?

CONNIE:

C'mere and look.

MEL:

Yup; it's a cross all right. Lying right here in the middle of the floor. What's it doing here?

MICHELLE:

It must have been for that "Prayer around the cross" service last night.

MICHAEL:

The what?

MICHELLE:

It's a prayer service. (*She demonstrates.*) They take the cross from over... there... and lays it down and then people sit around it or kneel and pray and sing and light a candle. It's nice.

CONNIE:

Oh. If we don't get it out of here, Sidney's going to blow up when he sees it.

MICHELLE:

Why?

CONNIE:

Because we can't work with it in the way.

MEL:

Well, then, let's move it. (*She moves to the cross and tries to pick it up*) Whoah! It's heavy.
Could I get a little help here?

MICHAEL:

'Chelle, can you run lines with me before Sidney gets here?

MEL:

(*to MICHAEL and MICHELLE*) Thanks a lot...

CARLA:

Come on, Mel, I'll help you.

CONNIE:

I think the three of us can do it.

SIDNEY enters.

SIDNEY:

Okay everybody; we don't have much time in here. Connie, did you bring the props? Please say you did. Ben, you lead a line-through. Where's M&M?

CARLA:

Who?

SIDNEY:

Michael and Michelle.

MEL:

Way over there. "Running lines."

CONNIE:

Sidney, uhm, Ben's not here yet.

SIDNEY:

(furious) What? Again? This is impossible. We have two hours to work in here before Sunday and we have to have everyone here or we're not going to – *(seeing the cross)*. What's this doing here?

CONNIE:

I knew you weren't going to be happy. Michelle says they used it for –

SIDNEY:

I don't care. Just get it out of here. And then, Carla, *you* get the line-through going. Okay? I'll try to find Ben. God knows where he is. *(Exits.)*

CARLA:

I'm sure God does.

CONNIE:

Told you he'd be mad..

CARLA:

Let's do the line-through.

MEL:

Okay. But could I get a little help with this thing first?

CARLA:

You mean *the cross*.

MEL:

(mimicking) Yes, I mean *the cross*.

CONNIE:

Where does it go? I mean, where do they keep it?

CARLA:

There's a stand around here somewhere. Back here, I think.

MEL:

Okay, “take up your cross and follow... her!” (*She laughs at her own joke*)

MICHAEL:

Hey, that’s my line.

MEL:

Pardon *me*, JESUS.

CARLA:

Hey, could you take it easy? It’s church. (*She goes off to look for the stand that holds the cross.*)

MEL:

Sorry. (*She’s not sorry.*)

CONNIE:

Let’s just get the line-through going.

BEN enters.

BEN:

I’m late, I’m late, I’m late. I know, I know, I know. Where Sid-

MEL:

Shhhhhhhhh! He’s making a phone call.

BEN:

WOW! *That* was close.

MEL:

He’s calling *you*.

BEN:

Oh... no.

MICHELLE AND MICHAEL reenter.

MICHELLE:

Hi Ben. Where ya been?

BEN:

I was helping – I mean, I was stuck in traffic. Am I in trouble?

MICHAEL:

You know the saying, “if you’re on time, you’re late.” What do you think?

BEN:

I think I was late; what does that make me?

MICHAEL:

A loser. Right, my belle?

MICHELLE:

(sotto voce) Don’t call me that.

MICHAEL:

Why?

MICHELLE:

(sotto voce) It’s embarrassing.

CARLA discovers a discarded church bulletin.

CARLA:

Hey, you guys. Look at this.

MEL:

Now what?

CARLA:

It's last Sunday's bulletin.

MEL:

(very snide) Well, Eureka!

CONNIE:

(whining) Carla... the line-through?

CARLA:

Okay – it's just that it's Mel's Gospel.

MEL:

My Gospel?

CARLA:

The one you just made fun of. "Take up your cross," and so on. Mark 8, verses 27-38.

MICHELLE:

I know that one. Read it out loud.

MICHAEL:

You know it?

CONNIE:

(protesting weakly) Carla...

CARLA:

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Pause.

CONNIE:

What would that *mean*, really?

CARLA:

Taking up your cross?

CONNIE:

Yeah, and “whoever wants to save his life will lose it,” or whatever.

CARLA:

(quoting again) “... those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.”

CONNIE:

I heard you the first time.

BEN:

It’s a difficult passage.

MICHAEL:

What it means is whoever isn’t running lines when Sidney comes back is likely to lose their life.

MICHELLE:

I think the hardest thing is denying yourself.

MICHAEL:

You don’t want to deny yourself. You love yourself too much.

MICHELLE:

(picks up on the accusation) What?

MEL:

(She enunciates extravagantly with sneering reference to MICHAEL) He's not picking on you, 'Chelle, it's hard for all ACK-TOHRS.

MICHAEL:

Hey, look who's talking. You're not exactly Queen of Denial.

MEL:

You know, that's about the stupidest, most unoriginal thing you have ever-

BEN:

Maybe it means getting over yourself. You know, all the things you sorry about every day. Lose them.

MICHAEL:

"... all the things you worry about every day"? They're my life.

CARLA:

Exactly. Deny them.

MICHAEL:

Right.

SIDNEY enters.

BEN:

(with forced cheerfulness) Hi Sid.

SIDNEY:

Hi Ben. Where were you?

BEN:

I had a thing this morning. I was helping someone out. I told you I might be a little late.

SIDNEY:

(*ignoring BEN*) Before we lose the whole day here, can we do a little work? Can we – that cross is still there.

CARLA:

We were just having a discussion about it.

SIDNEY:

About getting it out of here?

BEN:

No, we were talking about what it would mean to really, uhm, deny yourself, and take up your cross and follow Jesus.

SIDNEY:

I don't have time for you right now, ben. Thirty-five minutes ago, maybe. But *not* now.

BEN:

Okay.

CARLA:

Calm down, Sid.

SIDNEY:

If we don't get some rehearsal tie in here, I'm going to cancel the show. Now, can we just move that cross out of the way?

CARLA:

But we've been asking ourselves what it would actually mean to pick up the cross.

SIDNEY:

What could it possibly mean except that it will be out of our way? Mel, what's going on here?

MEL:

They were wondering what it would mean to do like Jesus said: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

SIDNEY:

Am I losing my mind? Michael? Move that cross. Please.

CONNIE:

I think what it means is that you do things for other people and not for yourself.

MICHELLE:

You help other people for Jesus.

MICHAEL:

Could you tone it down about Jesus?

MICHELLE:

Why?

MICHAEL:

Because it's embarrassing.

MICHELLE:

You're embarrassed about Jesus?

MICHAEL:

I'm... uncomfortable. Do we have to talk about this now?

MICHELLE:

Yes, I think we should talk about it.

CARLA:

(invitingly) Michael...?

MICHAEL:

Well, when you think about it, it's a ridiculous idea, isn't it? 2000 years ago they hang a guy on a cross until he dies. Then, they call him God and build a religion around him. How absurd is that?

MICHELLE:

He wasn't just a guy. He was Christ.

BEN:

He *is* Christ; the living Christ.

MICHAEL:

So *you* say. But how do you know? It's impossible. You know what I mean, don't you?
(*searching for support*) Mel?

MEL:

What I know is that we're getting ready to perform a religious play here in this church and you're playing the role of Jesus.

MICHAEL:

That's just acting.

CARLA:

Well, you can't "just act" with this cross in the middle of everything. Will you help us pick it up, Michael?

MICHAEL:

(*making a decision*) I know what you mean and I can't do it. I can't be in this right now. Maybe another time. Sorry 'Chelle. Sorry Sidney. I have to go. (*He drops the robe he was wearing and exits.*)

MICHELLE:

(*starting to go after him*) Michael...

SIDNEY:

Great! That's great! Perfect! Thank you very much, everyone. Now, who's going to take the role of Jesus? (*She looks from actor to actor*)

CARLA picks up the robe and puts it on.

CARLA:

I will, Sidney.

SIDNEY:

Don't be silly. We can't have a woman playing –

CARLA:

(Putting on the robe that Michael was to wear) “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.” *(as CARLA)* How was that?

MEL:

Not bad.

CARLA:

So, who'll help?

Pause.

BEN:

I will.

CARLA:

Mel?

MEL:

No. I think I'll sit this one out. But I'll be right here. Watching.

CARLA:

Connie?

CONNIE:

Deny myself and pick up my cross?

BEN:

(firmly) ... and follow Jesus.

Silence.

MICHELLE:

Can I?

CARLA:

I don't know. Can you?

MICHELLE:

I can try.

MICHELLE goes to where the cross is lying, CARLA follows her, as if to help.

CARLA:

Well, what do you think, Sidney? Should we give it a try? Pick up this cross and put it where it's supposed to be and get to work?

SIDNEY:

Most certainly. Pick it up, or don't pick it up. It makes no difference to me. If you think I'm going to participate in this sort of amateur approach to theatre, you can think again. If you get serious and you're looking for a an artist, you've got my cell phone number. *(Exits.)*

MEL:

(mostly to BEN referring to SIDNEY) Gotta love him.

CARLA:

Okay everybody. Let's pick it up.

CARLA, MICHELLE, CONNIE and BEN place themselves at various points around the cross and raise it up. It's heavy, tall, and awkward. MEL sits and watches them.

CONNIE:

Okay, where does it go?

MICHELLE:

Bring it back over here. (*They do.*) Now, set it in here.

BEN:

There! (*They step back.*)

MEL:

(*applauding*) Very good! Straighten out the arms just a little bit. (*CONNIE makes an adjustment*) Excellent!

MICHELLE:

Now what?

CONNIE:

Well, this rehearsal doesn't feel as important somehow.

MICHELLE:

Maybe we should postpone the play for a while. We don't have enough people to do it now anyway.

BEN:

(*surprised by the drift of the conversation; protesting*) No. I think we should perform the play.

CARLA:

It's what we *do*, isn't it?

CONNIE:

Yeah, but you have to admit, it feels different in here.

BEN:

(*sensing it too, but...*) What is it?

CARLA:

It's that cross. Maybe everything will be different with that cross in place. *(Pause.)* Let's do the play.

CONNIE:

We're two people short.

CARLA:

Are you still in this, Mel?

MEL:

Haven't made up my mind yet.

MICHELLE:

Can I go see if Michael will come back?

BEN:

Sure. I'll try to find Sidney. Should we meet back here?

CONNIE:

Let's meet at my place. At five. Okay? *(They begin to exit.)*

CARLA:

Are we just going to walk out of here after this huge ordeal? I mean, now we've got that cross up there, we're just going to leave it behind, like It didn't make any difference?

MICHELLE:

We can't stay in church every day for the rest of our lives.

CARLA:

I know some people do, practically.

BEN:

Too bad we can't just take it with us, like a really big prop, huh Connie?

CONNIE:

I think the church would frown on that.

MEL:

How about this: I know some people who do this as they leave the church. *(She walks to the baptismal font, dips her fingers in, and makes the sign of the cross on her forehead.)* I never knew why before. *(Exits.)*

CARLA, BEN, CONNIE and MICHELLE exit the church. On their way out, some or all of them put their fingers into the baptismal water and make the sign of the cross on their forehead or breast.

Pause.

JO enters with a large empty laundry basket. She sets the basket on the floor. She goes to the baptismal font and dips her finger in the water and makes the sign of the cross on her forehead. She picks up the shirts from the floor where they have been strewn during the course of the play and places them in the basket. She picks up the robe from the altar and places it in the basket. Then, on second thought, she places the robe on the altar. Then JO exits, carrying the basket full of costumes.

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